



State of Vermont
Vermont Department of Education
120 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05620-2501

March 30, 2010

Re: What Matters Most

Dear Superintendents, Principals, and Teachers:

I know many of you have concerns about the recent national emphasis on ranking schools and how our state fits with those expectations. I am writing today not to talk about formulas and rankings, winners and losers, but to talk about what I believe is getting lost in this conversation and truly is most important to all of us.

There is no question that Vermont has a tremendous reputation for its strong educational system, where our young people learn and excel and most go on to lead meaningful, productive adult lives. The key here is *most*, but not *all*. If 15 percent of our young people don't graduate, this means over 14,000 kids in our state today have a fairly slim chance of gaining employment as adults sufficient to sustain them and their families. If only 18.5 percent of our students eligible for free and reduced lunch reach proficiency in math by 11th grade, this means 29,000 kids in our state have little hope of gaining the skills necessary to be meaningful participants in today's global economy.

Yet I still hear some people say achievement scores do not matter or that they are not an accurate reflection of the learning that takes place. Our NECAP testing is based on the countless hours of work educators in Vermont and other northeast states put into creating high-quality standards for teaching and learning for our children. If, according to those standards and assessments, we still have tens of thousands of kids who will not graduate or who graduate without having reached those standards, that's a big problem. It is a problem we have to work together to fix, which brings me to my next point.

Ranking schools is a competitive approach to dealing with the problem stated above. It is not one Commissioner Vilaseca or I would have chosen. We have also made it clear both to the U.S. Department of Education and Vermont Superintendents that Models 1, 2 and 3 (closing schools, bringing in a charter school, or replacing the principal and half the teachers) are in most cases not possible or appropriate in our small, rural state. In fact, we fought to have the fourth model added to the required school improvement models for the Tier I and Tier II schools you have now heard so much about. The fourth model we fought for was the Transformation Model. Even though they heard us, they did not relent on their position about replacing principals who in their view are ineffective. If asked directly, I think this is something we would all have a hard time arguing with. It is the rare person who wants to keep doing a job in which they are not effective, and a rare school community that would support that individual staying on in a position for which he or she is not suited. We understand however, that choosing to make these decisions and feeling forced to make them with what may be less than desirable alternatives are two different matters entirely. But because contract decisions are a local matter the department is not taking a position on this.



Throughout all of this, we are committed to working with you to do the right thing for the children in your communities. In areas where the principal has been working hard to make change but their job is still in jeopardy, we have worked with the administration to consider ways for that person to be a meaningful part of the school improvement efforts going forward. We are also in the process of completing a restructuring of the department to more effectively support you in your efforts to continually improve instruction and learning outcomes for Vermont's children. Instead of having four people dedicated to school improvement, we now have a much larger team of high-quality, caring people who will work together across general and special education and support services to provide consultation to you in continuing the good work you are doing and incorporating new federal requirements where necessary.

When Commissioner Vilaseca and I were in Washington, D.C. last week, we discussed with other rural states and Secretary Duncan the many pressing issues we are facing, including proposed changes in funding, reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in a rural context, and also proposing a fifth model for future school improvement funding. Instead of automatically replacing principals who have been leading the school more than two years, a coaching, mentoring and leadership development approach would be applied concurrent with continuous feedback and evaluation for both the principal and the teachers in the school, prior to making changes in staffing.

Next week, I will send an update on the School Improvement Grant (SIG) application process and a summary of the more systemic elements contained within the SIG Transformation Model highlighting areas consistent with our own Transformation goals. Most of these are strategies I hear many of you are working to implement. Our hope is that we can work together with you on this, for the benefit not of *most* of our children, but the benefit of *all*.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rae Ann Knopf', written in a cursive style.

Rae Ann Knopf
Deputy Commissioner
Education Transformation and Innovation